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LIFE INTO ART–NOTES ON HENRY MILLER AND HIS PURSUERS

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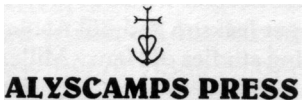
LIFE INTO ART–
NOTES ON HENRY MILLER
AND HIS PURSUERS

Karl Orend



Paris * Austin

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Life Into Art—Notes On Henry Miller And His Pursuers
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Dedication

This chapbook is dedicated to Leigh
Who gave me love and hope in barren times, and showed me
the beauty of Texas skies
And to
Dale Watson, whose friendship and music reminded me of
the beauty of the World and of its people when I could have
doubted it all.
I give thanks for his Holy Art

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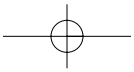

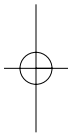

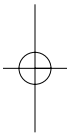

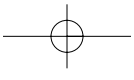

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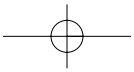

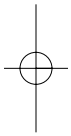

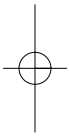

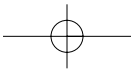

I NEVER HAVE, as Anaïs Nin did, associated honesty with loss of love, though I have reason enough to believe the two are often intertwined. Proust once said that lies are essential to humanity and that we lie most to those we love. Perhaps the underlying reason is the fear of absence, a terror of abandonment and judgement. From the earliest age I was aware that all lives were based, as Durrell claimed, on selected fictions and that facts were nothing more that starting points for understanding a life. Truth was subjective, spatially and emotionally conditioned. The most effective way of overcoming resistance to truth was to present it obliquely through the use of symbolism in art. The courageous and the visionary often extend this to their life.

I was born into a family where nothing was what it seemed. All my life I have seen myself in a way that few who know me would recognize. Many of the most important events and people in my life are known only to myself, and perhaps one other person. Much has never been written down. I have destroyed every letter I have ever received. I have been judged savagely and feel myself to be widely misunderstood. Yet there are others who love me and see me as a man of great integrity and a valued friend. Assumptions made about my character and experiences are often, I believe, wide of the mark. Perhaps all these factors help to explain my fascination with the art of biography and the fact that I find myself writing biographical accounts which usually go against the accepted norm.

My mother was illiterate. I still recall holding her hand, which clasped a ballpoint pen, and helping her to shape her name upon cards at Christmas. My father, who had been born in the mountains of Transylvania and come to England as a prisoner of war after five years on the Russian front and nearly two in a concentration camp, had never read a book since childhood. He was an outdoor man, uneducated past the age of 15, but able to speak six languages nonetheless. He inspired respect on sight, was one of

the most highly decorated soldiers of his rank, and the tenderest man I ever knew. Books did not feature in my childhood. I received a *King James Bible* at the age of five and this was my only reading till I discovered the world of books through a teacher, Pat Wilson, at the age of thirteen. Knowing that I had already lived an unusual life, travelling between communist Romania and the Fenland town of Wisbech, he tried to interest me in reading by giving me a book he thought I could relate to. It was Slavomir Rawicz's *The Long Walk*, story of a man who escaped from a Russian Gulag and walked a thousand miles to India only to be imprisoned by the British. My aunt Hannah had spent eleven years in a Gulag – a salt mine deep in the Urals. Thanks to my teacher's insight I began to read. My transforming reading experiences were all biographical. Some novels captivated me, but most of all I was interested in factual books, history and those which told the life of remarkable individuals, even if unknown. I came to biography young and read Lytton Strachey at 14. The favorite writer of my teenage years was Alexander Solzhenitsyn, whose books were often autobiographical, or constituted the collective biography of a persecuted people. Other early biographical treasures of this time were Gorky's autobiographies, the story of *Bible* smuggler Brother Andrew, and endless books of letters, the greatest of which were by D. H. Lawrence.

Throughout all my formative experiences the *Bible* accompanied me and its language and insight were without peer. It seemed generally true to me that "he who increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow." I realized that it was not always necessary to increase knowledge to increase insight or to reveal profound truth about a person's life. Without compassion I believe there is no insight. Knowledge and wisdom rarely go together.

All around me in my early years were people whose lives had been shattered or irrevocably altered by events beyond their control. I will never forget the day my father and I carried a message

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to the mother of our friend Hermann who had run in the 1936 Olympics and been thrown as a displaced person across Europe in the aftermath of war. Forbidden to return to Romania, he had not seen his mother for 32 years. Her tears and uncontrollable wailing in her small apartment remain clear in my memory to this day. My father had not recognized his own mother, whom he had not seen for 24 years, when he passed her on a railway platform as she stood waiting to meet him in Medias in 1966. Those I grew up around were often people whose lives would read as stranger than fiction. The narration of these lives was part of the oral tradition of my childhood. No one in my family read books. All my childhood memories are of experience and the narrative of other persons' lives. I often met people who could have stepped directly from the pages of a book. My days have been filled with extraordinary people. Most people's lives are extraordinary, but sadly most people also lack the compassion, the patience and insight to notice them.

Once I sat in a café in Austin, Texas with a fellow biographer. It was early in the morning and the brutal sun was still gathering strength. A man appeared suddenly and came to the table besides us. He was shabbily dressed; his pants poorly hitched and dirty. He wore a long ragged beard and looked like some unkempt eastern patriarch. It was obvious that he had been sleeping rough and his old delivery bike was laden down with *panniers* carrying all his possessions, dirty clothes, a sleeping bag without a cover and a mass of soiled and well-thumbed books. Seating himself at the table next to us he began to unload his books and scatter them over the big round table. Finally he took a stack of pencils of varying length and placed them besides a huge ledger book in which he began to write with intense concentration. My fellow biographer was disturbed by his very presence. The smell of him was potent. Within minutes my friend made excuses why we should leave. I preferred to stay. Being left alone I approached man beside me and asked if I might know what he was doing. "I am cycling

from Ohio to Mexico" he said "and I translate the *Bible* from Hebrew as I go." I asked to see his work, and sure enough the columns of Hebrew gave way to notes in Greek and finally a version of the scriptures in English. "And how do you feed yourself" I asked. "I take stir sticks from the cafés where they allow me to sit. I paste them together and cover them with card upon which I paint icons to sell for food." "What is your name my friend", I asked. "I am Obadiah" he replied. "Though I was born otherwise, this is the name God has chosen." I recalled Obadiah, the stories he told in the shortest book of *The Old Testament*.

"Behold, I have made thee small among the heathen: thou art greatly despised."

Obadiah was an anonymous man, thought by some to be the steward in Ahab's household of the *Book of Kings*, who hid and fed Prophets and in turn was made a Prophet by God. Others think he was a later man, who lived at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, a contemporary of Amos or Joel. From Mathew Henry's *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (1712) I remembered the words concerning Obadiah:

"There may appear much of God in a short sermon, in a little book; and much good may be done by it, *multum in parvo* – much in a little. Mr Norris says, "If Angels were to write books, we should have few folios" that may be very precious that is not very voluminous."

He had much in common with the Angels in disguise that both Miller and Yeats spoke of, and that I had myself encountered. The Prophet Obadiah (whose name means "servant of Yahweh") intended to rebuke pride, to give hope to the oppressed, and to reassure them that wrong would eventually be righted through Judgement. The evil would one day be punished. John Calvin reminded us, concerning Obadiah, that he also made mention of

Redeemers sent among us to lead us to safety and peace. Obadiah and I talked for an hour and I bought an icon to repay him for his time. I placed it by the altar in a nearby church in memory of my long lost son. The next day I awoke early and in my notebook wrote a first line: Obadiah arose with the morning sun. In the shadow of a Spanish Oak, to the whirring sound of a grackle bird, he carved a flute to keep him company along his way. His journey had begun on a day when he looked into the mirror and no longer saw himself there.

I have always been fascinated with biography because I believe that almost every person's life could yield a fascinating and unique story, if only it was written with compassion. I never tire of discovering people's lives. To do so would be to tire of humanity and creation itself. Emerson believed that novels would give way with time to biography as the only infinitely inexhaustible form. What he neglected to say is that biography and autobiography are simply another form of novel. All forms of creation are an expression of the Divine. When my friend walked away from Obadiah I knew that he was not what I consider a biographer in the true sense of the word. He lacked both compassion and imagination, he judged by appearances (as many biographers do) and in doing so he walked away from a fascinating and very human story, which could have yielded great truth and insight, potentially a great book.

When critic Wallace Fowlie spoke of the poet "retaining the sensibility of the child" he meant a state of eternal innocence in the face of experience, an abiding curiosity and ability to subjugate memory and live each experience imaginatively as if it were the first time. Such a person never loses faith in love, nor ceases to quest for life, wisdom and experience. He believes in rejuvenation and in mankind. Such are our finest poets and novelists, but also our finest biographers, because all biography is fiction masquerading as fact. Only a creative and imaginative response to

another person's life will yield a biography that retains the power to enchant beyond the age in which it was written. Only by placing the full weight of a profound compassion and sensitivity, together with acute attention to detail, upon another's life can a biographer truly grasp the complexity of what is, after all, a composite of infinitely variable fictions. Biographers tend to write for their own time and a market. In doing so they unconsciously often render their book impotent as a work of enduring art in its own right. Just as great novels are often only recognized with time, so great biographies may take time to be recognized for their insight. Those biographies which endure to be read (as opposed to be consulted for reference) are those which show all the hallmarks of being the primarily the work of a writer rather than a scholar. Scholars can be fine writers and vice versa, but the combination is rare. Just as the fine novelist can mislead the reader about the veracity of narratives based in life, so the biographer who is a fine writer may convince and prevail in his version of a subject's life by the power of his prose and presentation of data, rather than his accuracy.

As a child I was fascinated by the notion of identity and the mistakes and assumptions people make about other people's lives. My own life provides examples. This explains a preoccupation with truth and an inexhaustible curiosity that led me into the field of research. My father carried a German passport, but had never lived in Germany and had been assigned this nationality simply because he was fighting with German forces at the end of the war. I recall how both he and I loved country music and the only place to hear it in our small rural town was at the local ex-services club which was filled with British veterans. My father and I decided to try to become members to hear the music we loved. When we applied my father's strong accent in English and his unusual name were apparent. Yet his accent was not German, the secretary mistook him for Dutch, and so suddenly he was transformed in the imagination of his new found friends into a free

Dutch soldier, rather than the former member of the Waffen S.S. he was. That last sentence is one to provoke instant assumptions about my father's character. I know what they would be and they are false. My mother was Jewish. It was my father, not her, who spoke Yiddish and who I once saw in a synagogue on the rue des Rosiers in Paris holding a group of Jewish elders in thrall. I never knew for sure that my father believed in God until he was on his deathbed. Surface appearances are often illusory. Henry James developed his unfurling style of prose out of a pathological fear of being misunderstood. Facts stated baldly, without context and qualification, can create an overwhelming distortion of truth and historical accuracy.

I feel less and less connection to books as my life goes on and yet I am associated primarily with books by most that know me. In fact outside of my work I never read. One stray fact, statement or event in a person's life can radically alter our perception of their entire personality. In an unpublished note Henry Miller once remarked that he was at heart a failed composer. It is the only time he ever mentions ever having had the desire to follow that vocation. In my own life the woman with whom I most felt I could have spent a long and happy life was a Texas cowgirl, with whom I never talked of literature or my work. Her father was nominated for a Pulitzer, we shared the same birthday, loved to dance the two-step and watch the rodeo. I was happy with her, as I have never been. Happy just to let it be and let the wind blow by. I carry memories of her that sustain me. Yet were biographies of my life to be written then there would be no trace of her existence. We never wrote to each other, spent all our time alone, and I never told anyone her name. No one I knew ever met her. In public she wore a wedding ring and everyone thought we were man and wife. Henry Miller moved to California for a woman with whom he was passionately in love. He always said that no one would ever find out who she was, because he believed he left no evidence to link him and her together. Previous biographers have known only

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her first name. I discovered her traces purely by chance. Those people who live complicated lives often have a tremendous power of personal reinvention and in fact live multiple lives that are hidden in strata and parallel worlds the biographer usually has neither the ability nor patience to uncover. I know for example that Miller corresponded with over 20 Indian writers and religious leaders in the 1930s. None of their letters have ever been traced and only I know two of their names. Neither has been mentioned in biographies and yet the letters between them if discovered promise to yield untold riches because Miller felt closer to Hindu culture than any other. The discovery of these letters might be enough to write a whole new version of his spiritual life.

I have discovered in the process of writing biography that I am not a biographer at heart. I am a novelist who has become entangled in another man's life. The reason lies not in the subject or the methodology, but in the fact that my own conclusions about the nature of the craft are so at odds with the prevailing climate of what is expected and anticipated in the field. I lack the cruelty (in Artaud's sense) and the pretense of omniscience, the academic pretension and the lack of concern for others that biographers are so readily expected to display. My aim was never to write for the market, to make another's life sordid and scandalous simply in order to sell books. I care too much for people simply to do that. Yet in saying this I set myself against the world of publishing and biography of which I am supposed to be a member. I once tried to explain to an agent in New York how I had at times during my biographical research come close to destitution and was housed and ate only by charity. I had cried at the sight of good food. Showing a lack of humanity I have often noticed in the profession, she simply told me it would be good for publicity later and passed on. Language, which is the biographer's main tool, can be either a means to communication or the greatest obstacle to it. Words and their import, just like actions are unique in meaning to every individual. I know how harshly outsiders could judge my

own life. That is why those people about whose life I have written, such as D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Michael Fraenkel and Beckett are fascinating to me – each of them had in his own life a complexity which allows them to be easily misunderstood and misrepresented. Yet each of them was a profoundly religious man. I see in them echoes of my own dilemma, my own isolation. Yet I do not believe this ability to see parallels negates my version of their life, as others might claim. I believe a more true and meaningful biography comes from an ability to understand and feel for another person's life than from a biographer who judges another human being. Or from a biographer who confuses objectivity with hostility and setting themselves above a creative artist who has usually suffered, endured and achieved far more than the biographer could ever dream of. Truthful men often provoke intense hostility.

Biographers require (in my opinion) humility and yet this flies in the face of the assured academic pose (and competitive spirit) on which the biographer's career is usually founded. Can one expect a balanced and compassionate version of Henry Miller's life from a writer such as Mary Dearborn, who is a Jewish, feminist New Yorker, when Miller hated New York, was accused of anti-Semitism and misogyny? To me it seems highly unlikely because the instinctive prejudices of the biographer and expectations of their public would seem likely to lead to a prejudgment and sifting of the evidence, even if unconscious. From the moment I set out to write a biography of Henry Miller people told me what I could and should say. I should not claim he was a major author, I should be sure to make clear he was an anti-Semite and pornographer, a deeply fucked up misogynist, and be sure to play up all the myths of Paris to help sales. I simply don't believe any of this to be valid. Thus the biographer's dilemma emerges - how to protect his own vision of a life from the expectations of both public and publisher and exit the stage true to his own convictions.

I turned to Henry Miller most of all because I felt a kinship with him in the sense that he was deeply misjudged and his own suffering was not recognized. I have little in common with him as a person, and he is not by far my favorite writer, but I do have a deep admiration for his courage and his achievement in the face of overwhelming odds. I have empathy for his failings as a man, and see all his weaknesses, yet I do not judge him. I encourage the reader not to judge him either, but so see that like all people he had both fine attributes and failings. I came to offer an alternative version of his life. One that would not pander to preconceived notions of his personality and work, but rather open him up to rediscovery by applying to his life something that has been sadly lacking – compassion. In doing so my work is immediately suspect, and can only be redeemed by a depth a scholarship and vision that can overwhelmingly show my truth is as valid as others who passed before me.

By training I am a prehistoric archaeologist and environmental scientist and have no background in literature. The skills these disciplines have given me are largely ones of reading between the lines and seeing an overall landscape as a composite. Also a minute attention to detail and a concern to walk away from the data that most other biographers use in recounting a person's life and focus instead on minutiae, on little known letters and unusual sources. My background leads me to mistrust what is on the surface and to inquire deeply into that which is hidden. In all the years of archaeology, since I dealt with a period before writing existed, I never knew the name of any human being I studied, or the names by which they knew their own cultures, or what language they spoke. Yet everywhere I saw evidence of these peoples' profound humanity. I seek coherence (rather than unity and absolutes) and to paradoxically proffer contradictions. This reminds me of Nancy and Lawrence Durrell sat staring at a wall in Corfu. Nancy asked what color the wall was and Larry instinctively answered "gray". By making him fix his full attention upon

the stone she made him see that what in the composite appears gray was composed of a melange of gray stone with gray-green, dark yellow and brown lichen, flecked with mica and quartz. A deeper truth emerges from the acute observation of detail. The simple presentation of detail without imposing order upon it can yield a portrait of a man that will surpass any marshalling of facts. I am by nature a religious man with a deep concern for others, by instinct a writer, by inclination a historian. The combination of these disciplines is what led me to biography.

In prehistoric archaeology one is forced to search constantly for interconnections and to ask penetrating questions about motivation and process. Most biographers take the easy way out and make assumptions or skip inconsistencies or detail that does not follow the narrative drive they wish to impose upon their material. They deal with the larger picture driven by their preconceived plan, while I compose by an accumulation of detail, rather like painting an impressionist portrait. I do not seek to impose unity because to be human is to be filled with contradictions. I believe Anaïs Nin's statement about the inexhaustibility of versions of a life.

"In the diary I had an example of a continuum which did not come to an end, but which changed…there was always another truth around the corner, there would always be another revelation, another discovery about my father…the diary made me aware of organic and perpetual motion, perpetual change in character."

A comparison of two accounts of Henry Miller's departure for Paris in 1930 illustrates the importance of detail and empathy to a deeper understanding, of the portrait of a man's life. Robert Ferguson in one of the three standard biographies writes of Miller's departure for Paris thus:

"Progress on the book (*Crazy Cock*) throughout 1929 was halting, and when June suggested to him, in early February 1930, that he should return to Europe and try to get it finished, he jumped at the chance. She persuaded him that she would be able to keep him with money obtained from Roland Freedman, and promised she would join him there as soon as she could."

To my mind this is not enough to explain an event that would be the determining catalyst for Miller's emergence as a writer, end his marriage to his muse, and set the course for his entire life. It is factually accurate but totally untrue. Therein to my mind lies the essence of biographical art – the distinction between realism and reality. My own version would read thus:

By January 1930 Henry Miller had been married to June Edith Mansfield for nearly six years. The marriage had been unhappy, and under huge strain for nearly four years. Miller summarized their tempestuous relationship in no uncertain terms: " we loved each other and we tortured each other… We lived on poetic heights, where the skin burned and became transparent… and we lived in the stench of scum. Sometimes we lived like… well, call it pimp and prostitute, if you want…" And so they did.

The strife in Henry and June Miller's marriage had by now become too much for June to bear. She had in her own words been a "slut" for Henry, an escort obtaining money from a seemingly endless stream of admirers, and done everything to help him become a writer of consequence – it all seemed to no avail. It had been a main source of income since the age of sixteen. One evening, in the second week of February 1930, June took Henry aside and suggested to him that since he was obviously unhappy in New York then he should return to Paris, which they had visited in 1928, and try to establish his career. It was true that Henry felt marooned and ostracized in New York, unable to publish, his talent unrecognized, but he was afraid to be alone on a strange

continent, afraid of what June might do in his absence. He had almost never been alone, without a woman or close friends by his side. Paris had been for some ten years the real literary capital of America and had given birth to many of the most significant books of recent years, both in English and French. Henry knew instinctively that June was not being truthful, and that in fact she wanted to be rid of him, she could no longer bear to live the hellish life they had been sharing. Dishonesty about their motivations and desires, true feelings and the state of their marriage had by this point become second nature. As Miller later described it "we were making sacrifices for each other, sacrifices we both wanted. In other words, quite in keeping with our mode of life, we lied to each other when we wanted to arrive at a truth." Since 1927 June had been involved with Roland Freedman, known as "Pop", and had effectively shared her emotional life between two men – whether her relations with Pop were sexual no one knew, least of all Henry.

The moment June suggested that Henry leave and move to Paris his heart sank, there was a gut feeling that something was ending, things were not as they seemed. He instinctively refused, recalling as he did that the only time they had been separated for any length of time – when June had taken off to Paris for the first time with bisexual artist and poet Jean Kronski in April 1927, leaving him an emotional wreck. Kronski absconded with a would be writer she had met named Alfred Perlès, and June consoled herself with a wealthy man she met in Paris – thus Roland Freedman had entered their lives. June had now set her mind on Henry going abroad – she couched the idea in terms that she could justify as being in his best interests and in the pursuit of his career. It was disingenuous. June would, she said, join Henry later. There was a scheme afoot to obtain a large sum of money from Freedman (who had funded their previous trip and much of their lifestyle since autumn 1927). Henry was spoiling the plan by being ever present; exhibiting jealousy and making demands,

which took her valuable time and energy away from her objectives. June presented the idea callously, with complete detachment and cruel indifference to the feelings of Freedman.

It was a cold day in Brooklyn, with dirty snow lying in the streets. June sat by the window to outline her plan, with pins holding up her skirt, the apartment in its usual disarray (Henry loved things neat, June lived in constant disorder), the bathroom filled with June's expensive perfumes and lotions, gifts from Freedman and Stratford Corbett, insurance agent, another admirer. Henry resisted, said he did not want to go. His memories of Paris were all of the time he had spent there with June in 1928. It had been an unhappy voyage, perhaps the most unhappy time of his life he later recalled. Henry had almost no good memories of his stay, except for the few brief hours he had spent alone wandering in the shabbier streets, and a view he had adored from the upper floor toilet of a ramshackle hotel in the Ilôt St. Severin. That view of the oldest quarter of Paris was a moment of epiphany – "the vista was so sweepingly soft and intoxicating it brought tears to my eyes…. I stood there dazed lost in a trance." The life of Montparnasse cafes, as seen through June's company, aping Hemingway's crowd had however been to Henry little better than being in the worst parts of Greenwich Village (where June held a job at the famous Pepper Pot). The great epoch seemed to have faded and wannabes and poseurs peopled the bars and cafes. Nothing about the 1928 trip at the height of the Lost Generation era had meant much to Henry – each evening they walked back to their hotel passing between the Deux Magots and the eglise St. Germain des Pres, along the rue Bonaparte. Henry had felt "washed out with talk, sick of faces."

June promised that February day that she would send Henry money to live on through early 1930 and then join him in Europe later once a large sum had come through. They could live abroad or buy a house. He still balked at the idea, and yet something

about going to Europe alone sorely tempted him. Henry still had no desire to go to Paris – instead he began to moot the idea of going to Spain where he knew other Anglophone writers had found a cheap and beautiful refuge. He had glamorous ideas about the kind of Bohemian artistic life that could be lived there, derived mainly from *The Sun Also Rises*. Miller had also read and admired Waldo Frank's *Virgin Spain*, Cervantes, Washington Irving's *Tales from the Alhambra*, Henry de Montherlant's *The Bullfighters*, and the descriptions of Spain given in the works of one of his favorite French writers, Elie Faure. The Seizin Press run by Robert Graves and Laura Riding was operational, and in 1929 had moved to Spain, with a motivation to print "necessary books." They had already, by early 1930 issued books by Graves, Riding and Gertrude Stein. Spain seemed a viable and more appealing destination to Henry, though June knew well enough that this was based on his imagination and the lack of desire to revisit Paris, the scene of difficult memories, rather than any practical reality. For his part Henry was tired of cold northern climes and the bustle of a huge city, he wanted to feel the sun on his face and to see strong women moving to their own internal music. Henry was almost convinced June was sending him to France because she believed that French women were unattractive, and because he said he hated France and she wanted to punish him. A few days later they returned to the subject. June was adamant that he should leave and, typical of his character, he allowed her to make the decision for him. He grudgingly acquiesced, and fell in step with the objectives as she presented them.

In mid February 1930, Miller was at the apartment, drunk with his cronies, during a violent snowstorm, when June arrived home. Brushing the snow from her coat she took him over to the window, out of earshot of his friends. She presented him with a one-way boat ticket to Europe and made it clear she expected him to use it. Henry's mood swung back and forth – he had agreed to go and yet tried to delay his departure. This was, June tried to con-

vey, and the opportunity to go to the place Malcolm Cowley had described as "the literary capital of the United States" — Paris. Miller finally applied for a visa to travel to Paris on Wednesday February 19th 1930 and sailed for England the following day with two large suitcases, books and manuscripts, and fine tailored clothes from his father's tailor shop, in a large trunk. Upon leaving he left behind a carbon copy of *Moloch* and *Lovely Lesbians* two unpublished novels with June in case she could interest a publisher and took the unfinished revised version of the latter, eventually to be known as *Crazy Cock*, with him. Miller had approached a New York agent, George Bye, and had secured a tentative acceptance for Miller's novel in progress, on the basis of existing drafts, from Cape and Smith.

The Henry Miller who would embark for Europe was a tormented man. He felt emasculated and frustrated by his inability to keep his wife by his side or to write books people wanted to publish. June's patience was running out after over six years of supporting him, and, in a candid interview late in his life, he admitted he had finally agreed to go to Paris in order to try to save their shipwrecked marriage. The evening before his departure Henry spent alone. It speaks volumes about the estrangement between them that his last hours in New York June did not chose to spend in his company, and that she didn't even care to see him off at the dock. Deeply disturbed by thoughts of the journey that he was about to make, only his third real separation from June in nearly seven years, the evening of 19th February, fresh from obtaining his French visa, Miller spent walking the cold dark streets of New York. He visited the Jewish chess club on 14th street. Miller had loved chess since childhood, though he was an erratic, impulsive player - it was one of his favorite recreations with June. The barely lit room was filled with dust and smoke - a heap of dead rabbits lay on a table in the corner, there was sawdust on the floor; this was the New York in which he felt at home – the city of the poor, immigrants and tenements. Henry stopped

in to say goodbye to his childhood friend, who had once entranced him with stories of Paris, Emil Schnellock, and borrowed ten dollars to tide him over – June had raised the boat fare, but no spending money. In the previous week Henry had met Roland Freedman for the very first time, and he knew deep down that he was being sacrificed by June for the sake of giving her the freedom to explore life without him. Henry was too afraid at the thought to confront her, allowing her to take control and define "truth" as he had done through much of their marriage. It is probable that one of the motivations behind getting Henry to leave was that somehow Freedman had finally discovered Henry was June's husband and issued an ultimatum, that she get rid of him. June knew things were coming to a head. If she were to make any kind of large sum from Freedman before trashing him as she had so many men then she needed to give him the illusion of being the man she would choose over Henry in order to gain leverage to bring her scheme to fruition.

On the morning of 20th February Henry Miller left his second floor apartment at 7 Clinton Street and walked down the stairs towards his cab, headed for the dock. June, still in her kimono, opened the apartment window, above a flower shop, to wave him goodbye. As he exited the building a man asked the superintendent for Mr. Miller, yet Henry nervously sped by. He noticed Roland Freedman, his overcoat pulled up high around his face to keep out the bitter cold, smoking a cigar, and his chauffeur and car waiting by the other side of the road to witness Henry leave. He imagined that Freedman's man was sent over to check the destination on the trunk, and perhaps even followed him to the dock. Henry was tormented by thought of what Freedman and June would say to each other following his departure. Henry's last recollection of New York was standing on deck in a snowstorm. The skyscrapers were almost imperceptible amid the blanketing flurries, only their outlines dimly visible. The atmosphere was peaceful and it seemed strange to see such huge quantities of snowfall

and yet nothing settling on the deck. Henry felt terrifically uneasy and at the last moment an almost irresistible desire to retreat and disembark. As the ship pulled away he felt that a snowstorm was eerie, and gave him a sense of foreboding. Deeply depressed he descended the stairs to his cabin - unlucky 13. Henry threw himself on the small bed and wept uncontrollably for hours. The journey was uneventful and Henry was deeply sad, felt bereft. He killed time by reading the *Bible* and playing chess with strangers. On board he met an Irish novelist from the Village, who told him that the best writing technique was to type dressed only in a jockstrap while drinking whisky. A six-day voyage can seem like an eternity at sea. And in his days of loneliness and dark imaginings, Henry thought back on his life with June, and to the way he had imagined this voyage to London, so many years before, with his wife by his side."

The enormous difference with which the same event and facts can be described is due entirely to the biographer's personality and the decisions he makes about both his subject and his choice of material. The biographer's own writing and his experience of life and his empathy for the subject will determine the truth and content of his narrative.

Artists and writers often tell symbolic truths about their own lives rather than facts. This is so both in what they put on paper and what they say. Ford Maddox Ford is a famous example. He has often been described as a liar, but like most writers his truth was symbolic and personal. Anaïs Nin spoke about developing "the continuum of the personality instead of conclusions or resolutions, which were invalidated by any recognition of the relativity of truth." When Miller in the 1940s invited Conrad Moricand to come live with him in Big Sur, an event which had disastrous consequences recounted in *A Devil in Paradise*, biographers have accepted Miller's account as factual. Yet they never asked the question why Miller would invite a man whom they

assume he knew only as a casual friend to come and share a cabin with him, his wife and two small kids, for the rest of his life. In fact Moricand was one of Miller's dearest friends and a man who had influenced his life and work deeply. Previous biographers ignored their large correspondence simply because it was in French. To read Miller's *A Devil in Paradise* one would view Moricand as a monster and a man for whom Miller had nothing but disdain. Yet this text is a cruel and totally distorted portrait of a man to whom Miller was deeply indebted written after a bitter quarrel and the end of one of Miller's most important friendships. Moricand as shown is a savage caricature. Caricature is, Anaïs Nin noted a form of hatred. Miller hated Moricand for not being as he imagined he would be. It was Nin who had introduced them. She wrote after reading *A Devil in Paradise* "This is not Moricand. I only wish he had not called him by his family name." Yet to Miller's biographers this story has been their main source of Moricand's personality. Nin saw that Miller specialized in picaresque and violent caricature. As a writer herself she never confused, as the public and biographers did, people as he portrayed them and the reality of a person. What writers like Miller and Nin present as fact is often fiction. Part of my fascination with biography is the process by which life is transformed into art by dramatization and symbolization.

Few biographers have I notice deep compassion and empathy for their subject. They fear that if they do then their version of a person's life will be discredited and disbelieved. Distance and a certain degree of harsh judgement are needed to ensure credibility. The artist is outside of society's norms, while the biographer is usually very much of them. Modern media preconditions the public to have an undue preoccupation with scandal, sex, and simplistic notions of truth and history. A fine biographer can bridge this gap, as in David Reynolds's *Walt Whitman's America*. Society changes and evolves and with it so do acceptable biographical paradigms. Certain historical facts are unwelcome and to

remind of them provokes instinctive hostility, often masked as objective criticism. Such was the case of the denunciations of James Barque who wrote of the enormous cruelty often inflicted on German civilians and soldiers for years in the aftermath of World War Two. In the 1920s and 30s many intellectuals would have gone to any lengths to protect the image of Soviet Russia. The estimation of writers and artist often rises and falls with succeeding generations. That is why I believe one of the fundamentals of a fine biography is to anchor the subject in the climate of his times. The courage of the biographer (who is in part social and cultural historian) also comes into play. How much dares one say? And how deep does integrity run in the face of unspoken or overt opposition, the fears of the publisher? Some writer's careers have been virtually destroyed by writing a biography that while telling the unwelcome truth was viciously attacked by coteries and vested interests who sought to protect the subject's reputation. An example would be Richard Aldington's treatment after writing a biography of Lawrence of Arabia, which exposed his numerous lies about his exploits. Aldington went from being one of the most famous critics, novelists, poets and translators alive to a man virtually destitute and unable to publish, living on charity. All thanks to a methodical campaign to destroy his credibility and career backed by figures like Robert Graves and Winston Churchill. Biographers need above all to have the guts to challenge the accepted view of their subject. It is vital that a biographer understand how their subject was perceived and judged by their own time, and why. Also how they perceived themselves. When this differs from contemporary evaluations, then a conscientious biographer should investigate whether the dichotomy is due to the evolution of society itself, or whether rather it is due to the impact of previous biographies that have tipped the scales in a certain direction, or both. If the latter seems to be the case, then again the biographer takes center stage and needs to explores how a former biographer's personality and interaction with facts led to the kind of book which was written. The biographer's own bias

and background determines the kind of biography written. Truthful resonance is confused at times because the biographer does not have the intellectual humility to admit his or her own bias and weakness. Only the compassionate, creative and historically conscious biographies endure. All the rest are swept away by the passage of time and evolving society. The seed of misunderstanding of historical figures can however lie dormant for decades.

Many writers are judged without being read, let alone understood. Only when the writer can be understood in the context of his age and the role of previous biographies in determining his or her status is fully explored can we hope to arrive a new and more finely nuanced portrait of our most significant literary figures. The exploration of evolving perceptions of a personality helps illustrate the fact that society's perceptions of a writer are usually formed by biographers, even after their biographies cease to be widely read. Their conclusions haunt the reputation of their subject, even if false and untrue to the evidence. Understanding the biographer themselves therefore becomes key to understanding the biographical record and indirectly the fate of their subject. There are *au fond* no real facts, only interpretations of them. Truth is subjective and the biographer will often only have his "truth" accepted as fact if he or she falls within the range of perception of the subject that already exists. The writer is, said Stalin, "the engineer of human souls" and if this is true then the biographer is the engineer of his subject's reputation. An uncompassionate biographer can totally distort the life of his subject and yet paradoxically provide the only version that is both believed and remembered.

Some biographers are expert in presenting their writings in a way that commands acceptance of their interpretation by critics and reviewers. This can lead to a situation where details presented as factual enter common currency and become accepted as

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accurate, even being used as such by later biographers, even though the detail described is untrue. An example would be Deirdre Bair's assertion in her biography of Anaïs Nin that well-known columnist of expatriate Paris Wambly Bald was often invited to Nin's house with his wife to provide local color, and also offered Nin newspaper work. Bald was not married and was in no position to offer newspaper work. Nor is there any evidence that Bald was a good friend of Anaïs and her husband. In Bair's biography of Nin she attributes ownership of Carrefour Press (which I run and own) to a man who has no connection to it and thanks him for supplying her with letters between Fraenkel and Nin which I in fact supplied. Betty Ryan was written about as the lover of Henry Miller by four biographers all on the basis of the "fact" being stated by one author. Not one of the biographers when approached could provide any evidence to support the assertion. Betty had always denied it. In response to my insistent inquiries I received answers as diverse as "I don't remember where I got it from" to "who the fuck cares." Betty Ryan did, because it was her life being tarnished. I cared because I felt her pain. This carelessness and lack of concern for truth in endemic among certain biographers. Similarly the assertion made by Miller biographer Robert Ferguson that his subject did not take fellow writer Michael Fraenkel seriously and only pretended to do so in order to get handouts of money, is totally false. Yet this statement has influenced the public perception of Fraenkel for some twenty years, leading him to be dismissed as a nonentity, rather than the seminal influence on Miller's life and work that he is. These examples show the enormous power a biographer has to distort truth and to alter the historical records, to have inaccuracies and falsehoods accepted as gospel by a public and by publishers who are not in a position to know better. It speaks to the duty and responsibility of the biographer to treat the biographical record with respect, to not embroider or invent facts and to state as fact only that which can be known with certainty. Interpretations of a subjects' actions should not be made solely from the perspective of

the biographer, but should also take account of how the subject himself would have perceived and intended their acts to be seen, and allow for mitigating circumstances. If in doubt the biographer, should (but rarely does) err on the side of generosity. Part of my reason for being so concerned with biographical truth and to encourage complex and detailed observations of a subject's life and motivations is the realization that I would myself suffer irredeemably were I to be the subject of a biography. Or at least subject of one that ignored the nuances of my life, and painted only the surface facts. I am most deeply interested in those writers and artists who expose themselves with all their failings. Like many of the writers I admire I believe that realism and reality have little in common. I approve of Nin's statement that "the pattern of the deeper life covered and disguised will only be uncovered and demasked by the writer's process of interpretation of the symbolic meaning of people's acts, not a mere reporting of them or their words…. Facts stated objectively, scientifically, statistically, without the artist's power to communicate their meaning, do not give us an emotional experience. And anything we do not discover emotionally will not have the power to alter our vision. In reportage we are once more cheated of experience, and realism is substituted for reality."

Miller echoed this fear. Miller wanted a biography to be written but while many writers wanted to control the content of a biography, he was more interested in controlling the form. His aim was not necessarily to make sure its accounts of his life did not differ widely from his own. If they did then this would show that Miller was not identical to the auto-hero of his books (a myth that was part of his appeal) and they would begin to unravel the distortions and techniques on which his accounts of his life in the books were founded. That he could accept, because the technique he had developed for his novels called spiral form accepted that truth was spatially determined. Often in Miller's major autobiographical novels after *Tropic of Cancer* he revisits

the same events more than once and in each version may give a different account of facts. Each different version is intended to throw new light on the deeper meaning of the events for his personal history. What Miller sought above all was a creative response to his life and work. He told Roger Jones in 1977 (*Queen's Quarterly* 84)

"I place imagination above everything else. The word "realism" is something I hate almost, abominate. Reality is another matter… To me that has a great ring. A metaphysical ring…. But realism such as you get in writing, like certain of our American writers, to me is like the scum on the water…So anything that springs from the imagination, that's poetic, and that disregards fact – facts to me are only stumbling blocks."

When asked how he would rate a standard factual biography, he rejected it completely, knowing that many of the facts about his life could never be discovered. What was known could easily be radically distorted. In response to being asked about an creative or imaginative biography Miller was welcoming because to his mind only a creative writer could understand another creative writer well enough to produce a biography that conveyed the inner truth of the subject, as opposed to the surface factual truth. He went on:

"I would say that if you close your eyes and you are a poet you get more out of meeting with a man that would one of these reporters who's trained as a journalist or observer. Because you would sense your subject with all of your being. You see I never worry about the faults, the mistakes, or the errors of fact. That doesn't bother me. It's the insight, the man's penetration of the other's character that matters."

The inattentive biographer takes refuge at times in the "facts" gleaned from autobiographical novels, assuming they are gen-

uine. Often they are not. The mistake is to assume that the writer intended a portrait in the first place. Henry Miller's books were not, despite appearances, autobiography; neither were Nin's diaries. Once I found myself the hero or an erotic novel published in Australia. I was amused to see how wonderfully I had been made both more and less than I was. Amused also how facts had been selected and presented and things omitted to permit a certain narrative drive. That is why people who appear as characters in novels often write rebuttals, as Jessie Chambers did after *Sons and Lovers*. And why they take offense at their portrait, as many did with Nin's diary or why people interviewed often end up angry with the biographer who does not tell the story as they would have done. I am also vitally interested in this aspect of biography because I have heard "facts" stated about myself, sometimes by people who did not know me, that I consider totally untrue. Since the people did not know me they could not know anything but hearsay of another person who might in turn have lacked insight into or evidence for my actions. Henry Miller warned biographers that what they though they knew they did not always, but they rarely listened. Towards the end of his life Henry was explicit in a letter to his fifth wife Hoki Tokuda. This letter is a vital clue in understanding his personality and work and defining how the activities of the biographer him or her self and their assumptions about the subject alter irrevocably the frame of reference for their biographical narrative. Henry Miller told his fifth wife Hoki Tokuda in 1967:

"At bottom I have a secretive nature about those things, which are of vital importance to me. I can tell anecdotes easily, and I can parody others and myself. I can lie, distort, invent, and amuse. But when it comes down to the real facts, the real feelings, I am very reticent, and communicate only with my "guardian angel", so to speak…In spite of all the seeming confessions I have made throughout my works, my real self, my real adventures, remain hidden."

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Miller most definitely wished to be written about. The thing which really obsessed him and determined his reaction was the nature of the biographer themselves, their motivations for writing their books, and the ability he thought they had or lacked to see behind the surface structure and content of his books and touch the living man behind them. Henry Miller desired to be written about by a man of woman who was first and foremost a writer, not an academic or a professional biographer. Also by a person who had lived intensely and was inspired to write by creativity rather than denigration, careerism, or the marketplace. This is why out of existing books about him he would have certainly preferred the untranslated biography by French writer Béatrice Commengé to any of the existing modern American biographies. What he hoped for was a passionate and compassionate appreciation of his life and works that took for granted his intentions were not base but rather, as he had stated for decades, spiritually and socially orientated, motivated by a profound sense of humanity. In the 1950s Miller wrote to Perlès to tell him that as one whom had lived a complicated life he would never want his life examined by a cold worldly eye. If this happened then he would be judged harshly and damned outright. He knew his life and character would be judged by some as immoral and deeply flawed. Yet he also knew that hypocrisy was an undercurrent of contemporary society and many people, some of them famous figures, lived lives far more reprehensible than his own. The difference was they were able to hide it or be excused. Morality, like notions of truth and God was often in violent flux. Miller, as a banned author and painfully honest man, who exposed and even greatly exaggerated his own worst failings and refused to be other than he really was in order to conform, could expect no mercy. The terrible things he had attributed to his auto hero in his books (which were often untrue or exaggerated) and much worse would be believed automatically, without allowing for the fact he had suppressed the good sides of himself in his writings out of a kind of *pudeur*. If Miller was as callous and egotistical on a daily basis

as he suggested in *Tropic of Cancer*, then it should make no sense to a biographer that he inspired great loyalty and devotion. Nor that he had huge numbers of friends and benefactors and was widely perceived as compassionate, generous, timid, sensitive, and mild-mannered. Increasingly afraid for his reputation in the 1950s (he had young children by then and was in his 60s, though still widely banned in America) Miller allowed glimpses of other sides of his personality to appear through the observations of secondary characters throughout *Plexus* and *Nexus*. He sought to offer well-intentioned critics like William Gordon, Rives Childes and Wallace Fowlie insights into the structure and unstated aims and distortions of his fiction. One could not use June and Mona interchangeably he warned Gordon, they are not the same people. It was too little too late, and his attempts were soon overwhelmed by the impact of the censorship trials for *Cancer* in the 1960s, followed swiftly by the feminist and conservative backlash. Then in 1980 Henry died. Not before Georges Simenon had acclaimed him as a poet (in the sense of *Dichter*) and a great writer, Joseph Delteil as a religious figure and prophet, and Blaise Cendrars and Lawrence Durrell as writer of almost Biblical prose. Isaac Bachevis Singer thought him one of the most important writers of his time. *Black Spring* had been compared to St Francis' *Canticle to the Sun*, and *Tropic of Cancer* described as the most religious book to appear in English since the *Authorized Version* of the *Bible*. That previous biographers have not focussed on the religious and most personal aspects of Miller's deepest self or his most candid statements of his aims is to be regretted. Like D. H. Lawrence before him many of his most important philosophical essays are rarely read, and the dominance of a single work in his *oeuvre* has eclipsed the nature and breadth of his vision. Miller is only one of a whole group of writers who inspired me to inquire about the very notion of biographical accuracy and insight. His case is however one of the most telling in that Miller's biographers (including myself) write a shadow narrative of their own lives and emotional and intellectual make-up every time they write.

The biographer's use of language is one of his or her main ways of creating impressions about their subject. This can be either in the nature of the words used or in the selection of quotes, which when deprived of context can seriously change the interpretation foisted upon them by the reader. People also change over time. Artists are often people whose ideas undergo radical change, or may be spontaneous and unguarded in their words and actions to a degree that others who lead more settled lives find inconceivable. Readers should try to imagine every single phrase they ever uttered, every single word they ever put to paper, every single act they ever committed being used as evidence and interpreted by a stranger who does not share one's background or opinions, and may be hostile. Almost everyone would be horrified at the thought, and yet this is the fate of the subject of a biography, who is at the mercy of the character of his biographer. Writers like Lawrence or Whitman could change position drastically and contradicted themselves often. Therefore the biographer by judicious selection can radically alter the impression given, even by their subject's own words.

Asked why I became a biographer, I would admit freely that I did so out of a profound concern for others. Selfishly, I also wished to understand how my own life could be so misjudged. My engagement with the writing of biography will last only as long as it takes to convince myself that there is hope that there are readers who recognize that what passes in society for truth is often a collective lie. It was ultimately my own predilection for history and its distortions that gave the impetus for my inclination to challenged accepted versions of biographical narrative. All my life I have seen people close to me judged and misrepresented by others. Although I know that ultimately truth is of great disinterest to most people, it was and remains of fundamental importance to my own character and personal morality. Even though I may lack at times the ability to change people's preconceived notions of truth, I feel an emotional and moral obligation to at

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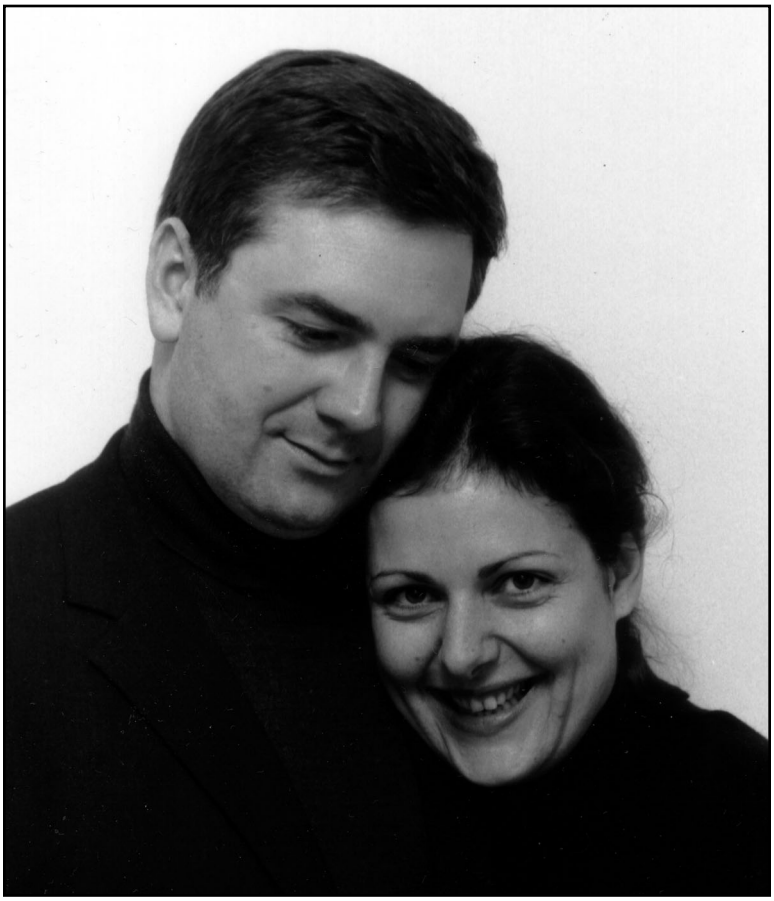
least offer an alternative version of life and experience. In doing so my objective is to, if nothing else, diminish the hostility with which those people who chose a life of creativity, including myself, are so often harshly judged.



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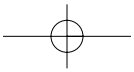

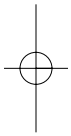

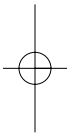

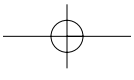

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